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RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING PRIORITY 6377
RUEHUL/AMEMBASSY SEOUL PRIORITY 4928
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO PRIORITY 1070
RUEHCHI/AMCONSUL CHIANG MAI PRIORITY 5684
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BANGKOK 003020

SIPDIS

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TAGS: PGOV KDEM KJUS ASEC TH

SUBJECT: THAI POLICE ARREST TWO PAD DEMONSTRATION LEADERS

REF: A. BANGKOK 2592 (PAD PRIMER)
 1B. BANGKOK 3006 (BLUE RIBBON COMMISSION)

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Classified By: Ambassador Eric G. John, reason: 1.4 (b, d)

SUMMARY AND COMMENT

11. (C) Thai Police arrested two leaders of the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) outside of the Government House compound over the October 3-5 weekend. One of the two, retired Major General Chamlong Srimuang, is widely seen as PAD's leading strategist. While Chamlong's arrest was not unexpected, PAD has reacted angrily, and an influx of sympathizers has joined the Government House rallies. Finance Minister Suchart Thadathamrongvech indicated to the Ambassador on October 6 that the arrests likely took place with Palace approval, presumably from Privy Council President Prem; a former top advisor to Thaksin Shinawatra seconded this view, saying the Palace (read: Prem) had likely signaled its assent without coordinating with the Somchai administration.

12. (C) Comment: If a leading Palace figure has indeed approved the arrests, in order to end the standoff between PAD and the authorities, the PAD has not yet shown it is ready to close up shop; the arrests have reinvigorated PAD's protests, which had badly lagged in numbers in recent weeks. We see no indication that the PAD will be more inclined toward acts of mayhem outside of the Government House compound, however. The arrests have at least temporarily scuttled talks between PAD and the authorities, and they may represent a political setback for Deputy Prime Minister Chavalit Yongchayudh, who was personally involved in negotiations with Chamlong. End Summary and Comment.

ARRESTS

13. (SBU) Police officials on October 3 arrested Chaiwat Sinsuwong, a leading member of the People's Alliance for Democracy, as he departed the residence of Kriangsak Choonhavan, a high-profile Democrat Party legislator. Although not one of the five core co-leaders of PAD, Chaiwat was one of nine figures who had been indicted on charges of

insurrection and other offenses in connection with the illegal and unruly PAD activities starting August 26.

14. (SBU) Police officials arrested Major General (ret) Chamlong Srimuang, who had been similarly indicted, on October 5, after he departed Government House to vote in the Bangkok gubernatorial election. Chamlong, one of the five PAD co-leaders, played a key role in organizing anti-Government protests as long ago as 1992, and he is widely seen as a key strategic organizer of PAD's street actions (ref A). Chamlong appeared to have anticipated his arrest; he had left a letter to be read to protestors at Government House at 9:00 a.m., describing the anti-government demonstrations as a patriotic duty, and instructing the remaining PAD leaders to break off negotiations with the government after his arrest.

REACTION

15. (C) Protests at Government House had become less energetic and poorly attended in recent weeks; on one mid-day, mid-week visit in late September, we counted no more than 250 protestors. Many supporters stopped coming to Government House in person, opting to watch the speeches via the pro-PAD Asia Satellite Television (ASTV). Chamlong's arrest in particular appeared to energize PAD sympathizers. On October 4, visiting INR analyst estimated roughly 1,000 supporters were inside the Government House compound. According to media reports, the crowd at Government House grew substantially after Chamlong's arrest, and PAD supporters from other provinces are moving into Bangkok. A senior police official told us on October 6 that more than

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10,000 PAD supporters were at Government House on the night of October 5. This official anticipated approximately 5,000 additional people to join October 6 rallies at the site.

16. (U) Democrat Party leader Abhisit Vejjajiva publicly expressed concern that the arrests would undercut recent effort to end the standoff. Talks between the RTG and the PAD have been suspended, according to PAD leaders' public statements.

INTERPRETATION

17. (C) Despite their outstanding arrest warrants, the PAD co-leaders had moved in and out of the Government House compound with relative ease in recent weeks, with Chamlong the only leader staying on the compound. As an example, when we met with PAD leader and Democrat MP Somkiat Pongpaiboon September 23 off the compound (Somkiat, as an MP, enjoys immunity from arrest), two of the other PAD leaders were wandering around the same building (HQ of the Manager Media Group, owned by PAD leader Sondhi Limthongkul). These arrests mark a new approach, and one that appears to undercut the simultaneous efforts of DPM Chavalit to negotiate an end to the standoff. (After taking office, Chavalit talked with Chamlong twice to discuss the standoff and sent a close aide to meet with Chamlong face-to-face at Government House.)

18. (C) Chavalit was frustrated by the arrests, according to press reports. A close aide of Chavalit, Major General (ret) Sorachai Montrivat, told us on October 2 (prior to the first arrest) that Chavalit already was dismayed by the current administration's perceived undercutting of his efforts on promoting peace in the South and was contemplating resigning from the cabinet. Sorachai said Chavalit felt that PM Somchai had privately asked him to take the lead on the south, only to declare publicly that he, Somchai would be in charge. In addition, an October 1 meeting between Chavalit and Army Commander Anupong had not gone well. Chavalit wished to pursue a strategy of peace in the south, Sorachai claimed, but Anupong and the army would take a harder line

(septel will address southern policy).

FINANCE MINISTER SEES INVISIBLE HAND

¶9. (C) During a courtesy call by the Ambassador on October 6, Finance Minister Suchart Thadathamrongvech, who was also recently named head of the new Puea Thai political party, said that the arrest of Chamlong came no doubt as a result of "a green light from above," implying from Privy Council President Prem Tinsulanonda. Suchart added that there would likely to be more arrests to come. Separately, the Ambassador met October 6 with Pansak Vinyaratn, formerly a top advisor to Thaksin Shinawatra. Pansak echoed Suchart's view, saying it was "absolutely clear" that the Police must have received clearance from a "higher authority" (the Palace -- again, presumably Prem) before arresting Chamlong. Pansak saw the Somchai administration as divided and ineffective (in part reflecting Thaksin's inability to control the political situation), and he believed that Somchai, whom Pansak considered meek, might well have been out of the loop on the decision to proceed with arrests. Pansak noted that, after being arrested, the PAD leaders might soon be released on bail.

¶10. (C) Kasit Piromya, former Thai Ambassador to the U.S. and currently an adviser to both the Democrat Party and PAD leaders, told us October 6 that the PAD leaders' legal circumstances might soon improve. He said that the next key development could come October 7, when the courts were expected to issue a decision on whether to drop the most serious of the charges against the nine PAD leaders, that of treason/insurrection (kabot in Thai). If the most serious charge were dropped, tensions might lessen again.

¶11. (C) Kasit did not appear to view the arrests as Palace-orchestrated, however. He considered the government

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to be responsible, and he condemned the Somchai administration for negotiating in bad faith. In addition to the arrests, he cited House Speaker Chai Chidchob's maneuver to place a Thaksin-friendly proposal to amend the constitution on the House agenda soon after an October 3 four-way meeting with PM Somchai Wongsawat and Opposition Leader Abhisit Vejjajiva (ref B); Kasit said he had recommended that the Democrat Party pull out of the four-way talks in protest. Kasit predicted that the PAD would press on with its protest regardless of the arrests.

JOHN